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# Inquiry As Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation.

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## Book Review

Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (2009). *Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation*. New York: Teachers College Press. 401 pages.

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*Inquiry as stance is neither a top-down nor a bottom-up theory of action, but an organic and democratic one that positions practitioners' knowledge, practitioners, and their interactions with students and other stakeholders at the center of educational transformation. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, pp. 123-124)*

Cochran-Smith and Lytle's *Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation* (2009) is an update to their foundational text, *Inside/Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge* (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Their new volume has more depth than merely another point along the continuum of the authors' long-standing collaborations. This book marks changes in their vision and also serves as a comprehensive compendium of references from researchers surrounding these research areas. The co-authors explicitly address how they turned away from the term *teacher* research to choose *practitioner* research. They explain that teacher research was an unnecessarily narrow specification and practitioner research opens expanded possibilities for a wider array of participants. Teachers are not the only practitioner researchers; this new vision encompasses school and district administrators, teacher candidates, teacher educators, community college instructors, community activists, and parents. This new inclusion further blurs boundaries between researchers, researched, research contexts, theory, and practice—concepts at the core of practitioner research.



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Sixteen years have passed since the first volume. Political and personal landscapes changed. Cochran-Smith and Lytle acknowledge the “trying times” dominated by standards movements, and calls for intensified accountability with outsiders planning whole school improvements. These changes “de-emphasized the strength of local contexts, local knowledge, and the roles of teachers as decision makers and change agents” (2009, p. 6).

*Inquiry as Stance* is more than a sequel to *Inside/Outside*. However, the authors maintain parallel structures between the two volumes. Both books begin with Part I that consists of five theoretical essays written by the co-authors contextualizing their research. These essays comprise nearly half of each book; however, *Inquiry as Stance* has a greater emphasis on theory of

practitioner inquiry and the implications amid current national educational policies. The intense, critical essays are important reading for both newcomers to this work and for experienced educational researchers in universities and other settings.

Part II in each book includes inspiring chapters written by practitioners. *Inquiry as Stance* adds Part III: a readers' theatre script entitled *Practitioners' Voices*. This piece is a jarring juxtaposition of perspectives drawn from the work of twenty practitioners aimed to make "visible some of the many personal, professional and political decisions and struggles practitioners face every day in their work in classrooms, schools, and other educational contexts" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 344). *Practitioners' Voices* has been performed at several educational research conferences.

The authors' five chapter essays in *Inquiry as Stance* convey a clear conceptual framework, initially defining eight commonalities of practitioner inquiry:

- practitioner as researcher;
- collaboration among and across participants;
- all participants in inquiry communities are regarded as knowers, learners, and researchers;
- focus of study is the site of inquiry, intersections between theory and practice, how practitioners theorize their own work;
- blurred boundaries between inquiry and practice;
- nontraditional notions of validity and generalizability;
- systematic documentation of changing classroom practices, students' learning, and practitioners' questioning and narratives; and
- practitioner inquiries are made accessible to the public.

The authors are attuned to several criticisms of practitioner inquiry; they name these as knowledge, ethics, and methods critiques. These critiques arise from those who contend that 1) practitioner inquiry is not based on scientific, evidence-based research projects, an idea keenly relevant to the United States' educational climate; 2) ethics can be questionable when the practitioner is also a researcher; and 3) autobiographical work can be viewed as too personal to be valid educational research. The authors cite previous collaborative writings where they have refuted these critiques.

The authors also directly address differences between the Practitioner Inquiry movement and Professional Learning Communities. The latter concept is gaining popularity in many school districts. A detailed explanation with an accompanying Venn diagram (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 53) compares and contrasts aspects of Practitioner Inquiry and Professional Learning Communities. The authors' stated goals to avoid oversimplification and unhelpful dichotomies note differences between these two realms despite similarity in their defining language. One critical example exposes important differences in their equity and accountability agendas. Both practitioner inquiry and professional learning communities aim to improve the education of those who have been marginalized by the educational system. However, as the authors reveal:

With practitioner inquiry, the larger project is not making schools into communities so test scores will go up and classroom practices will be more standardized. The larger project is about generating deeper understanding of how students learn—from the perspective of those who do the work. The larger project is about enhancing educators' sense of social responsibility and social action in the service of a democratic society. (p. 58)

These distinctions reinforce the position that

inquiry as stance is grounded in the problems and the contexts of practice in the first place and in the ways practitioners collaboratively theorize, study, and act on those problems in the best interests of the learning and life chances of students and their communities. (p. 123)

This stance interlaces theories of *how* to change with *what* must change, strengthening the steps of practitioners, university partners, and community members moving alongside each other in collaborative work.

Practitioners' written experiences in Part II of each volume demonstrate the changing nature of power relationships through practitioner research. The eight practitioners who write the chapters in Part II of *Inquiry as Stance* openly confront issues of race, class, identity, students' achievement, and teacher leadership throughout a variety of spaces. A moving portrayal by immigrant Indian teacher Swati Mehta begins with a letter from her mother who writes, "You can see culture and life like a lotus flower" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 293). Mehta notes that her "mother's language reflects the tone of my story—a complex tale about teacher research told as a personal, professional, and political journey" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, pp. 293-294). Mehta describes her struggle to create a hybrid space as an immigrant, teacher, and researcher negotiating Indianness and Whiteness.

Within the conceptual framework depicted in *Inquiry as Stance*, Cochran-Smith and Lytle squarely contrast the images of teachers' knowledge, teachers and teaching, and teacher learning that are assumed in current No Child Left Behind policies (No Child Left Behind, 2001). What do teachers need to know and do in order to teach students well, what are the purposes of teaching in school and society, what are the supports and constraints for teachers' learning? These are questions the authors ask. They envision a deepening link to local contexts, renegotiation of research-practice-policy relationships, reinvention of professionalism, and connection of the practitioner inquiry movement to other transformative agendas. The authors' clear enunciation of this framework and vision envisions directions for much work to be done, and more to accomplish together. "Across myriad contexts, practitioner research initiatives are proliferating, often 'pushing back' against constraining policies and mandated practices and opening up spaces for practitioners to articulate and enact deep beliefs about the fundamental purposes of education" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 6).

Figure 1, "Inquiry as Stance: Ways Forward" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 154), depicts the authors' vision for ways forward. Their framework is two concentric circles where the inner core circle is divided into three equal parts. The parts are: *Practice*, an interplay of teaching and

learning; *Communities*, catalysts for teacher learning; and *Knowledge*, from local and global contexts. Surrounding this inner circle is a circular space for *Democratic Purposes* and *Social Justice Ends*. Pushing outward are calls to *Reinvent professionalism*, *Connect the practitioner inquiry movement to other transformative agendas*, *Renegotiate research-policy-practice relationships* and *Deepen the local linking across communities*.

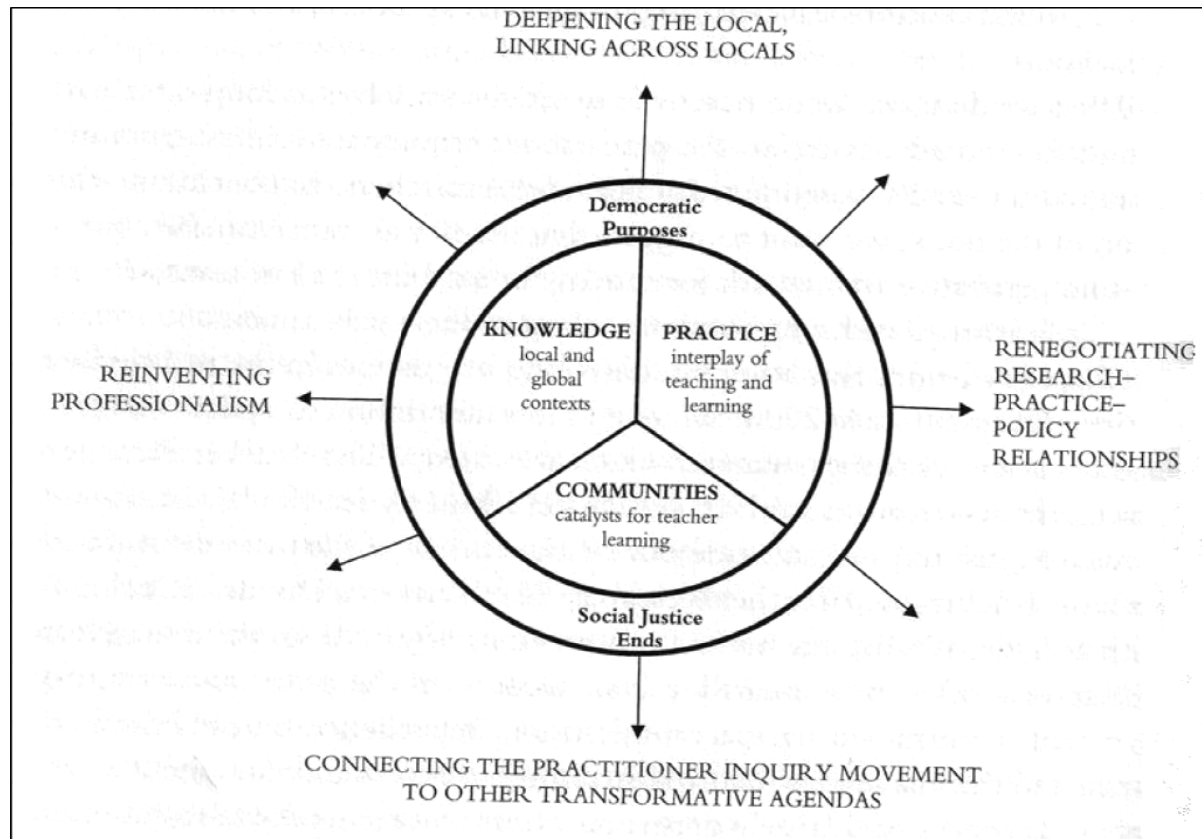


Figure 1. Inquiry as Stance: Ways Forward. Reprinted with permission from *Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner Inquiry for the Next Generation* (p. 154), by M. Cochran-Smith & S. L. Lytle, 2009, New York: Teachers College Press. Copyright 2009 by Teachers College Press.

Gerald Campano, former teacher, now assistant professor, articulates many of the goals of practitioner research speaking out from the *Practitioners' Voices* script:

One of the most urgent challenges for urban teacher researchers may be to reformulate a progressive language that has political efficacy because it is grounded in the actual lives of children and is persuasive about what is required for urban students to flourish. We need to communicate the complexity of our work with pragmatic effects. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 376)

Yes, now more than ever, teachers and practitioner researchers must combat the popularized, widely-distributed media portrayals of “bad teachers” at the root of failing schools. Practitioner

research offers hope for us to “take back accountability,” echoing Campano’s directive “to communicate the complexity of our work with pragmatic effects” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 376). *Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation* takes what has gone before, and adds a firm theoretical framework that synthesizes practitioners’ reflective work adding powerful voices going forward.

*Della R. Leavitt, Ph.D., is a 2010 graduate from the University of Illinois at Chicago’s Department of Curriculum & Instruction. She is currently an adjunct faculty member at DePaul University. Dr. Leavitt has served as a secondary mathematics teacher, supervisor of career-changing middle grades mathematics teachers, and facilitator of teachers’ inquiry projects. She has prior industry experiences as a technology systems engineer. Della’s future research directions are to work alongside urban teachers to find alternative ways to demonstrate teachers’ effectiveness, to co-author teachers’ narratives with her dissertation participant, and to contribute to mixed-methods educational research.*

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